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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 004432

SIPDIS

SIPDIS, SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA/A, S/CT
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID A-AA/ANE MARK WARD, CDHA/DG
NSC FOR AHARRIMAN
CENTCOM FOR CG CFC-A, CG CJTF-76, POLAD

SENSITIVE, SIPDIS

E.O. 12598: N/A
TAGS: [ECON](#) [EAID](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ELTN](#) [SNAR](#) [ASEC](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: Update on Japanese Ring Road

REF: A) KABUL 3850 B) KABUL 4388

Summary

¶11. (U) At the Embassy of Japan's request, Embassy and USAID staff have recently participated in discussions with the Japanese about the security situation in southern Afghanistan and its impact on the prospective start of Japan's segment of the ring road. We have described approaches to operating in a high-risk environment and shared the names of Afghan contractors employed by the USG in that region. Embassy also facilitated a security briefing by ISAF intelligence staff, which, while confirming a high threat level, also suggested approaches to mitigating risk. Our Japanese counterpart indicated the GOJ intends to move forward with the road but is still figuring out how to get it done in a sustained high-threat environment. End summary.

Minimizing Risk and Lining up Alternatives

¶12. (SBU) Econoff and USAID program manager for roads recently met with the Japanese Embassy's officer in charge of development issues, at his request, to discuss the status of the Japanese segment of the ring road in view of the security situation in southern Afghanistan. Japanese Emboff Kenji Saito told us that the Indian contractor was becoming increasingly nervous over the security situation in the area where construction is to take place. (NOTE: The Japanese segment is a 114-km stretch from Kandahar west to Gereshk, in eastern Helmand Province. End note.) The GOJ has no intelligence sources in southern Afghanistan and is trying to determine what the level of risk is; Saito was looking for any indication that Operation Medusa had improved the threat profile for the road area. To that end, Saito requested a briefing on the security situation in the South; the briefing was delivered at HQ ISAF on 24 September.

¶3. (U) USAID's roads manager shared several approaches to mitigating risk on construction projects in high-risk areas: using local unskilled labor, pre-planning with tribal elders, and using of Afghan construction companies where possible. Saito requested (and later received from USAID) the names of Afghan construction companies that the USG has used successfully. He took care to emphasize that the current contractor has not backed out of the contract, but rather that lining up alternatives was simply a precautionary measure.

A Tough Intelligence Assessment

¶4. (SBU) At the security briefing, ISAF CJ2 staff described the threat in western Kandahar and eastern Helmand provinces as high. ISAF detailed a number of attacks on commercial and NGO vehicles and operations and described the probability of future attacks as high. On the positive side, the CJ2 thought the security situation would steadily improve in the months to come, given ISAF's commitment to follow up recent military operations against Taliban fighters with a significant reconstruction and development effort. They also recommended careful negotiation with local tribal leadership as an integral part of the project.

¶5. (SBU) Saito reacted calmly to the intelligence assessment, saying that the GOJ had already made a decision to go ahead with construction. The questions now are how to do the work without using a Japanese company, which the GOJ is unused to doing, and how to ensure that the work is done to standards. He also indicated that the GOJ has done work in hazardous circumstances before and knows how to go about it. Nevertheless, Saito revealed deeper

KABUL 00004432 002 OF 002

doubts by asking point blank at the end of the conversation: Can commercial work proceed, given the security situation? The answer he got--that it has to proceed--hardly seemed to address his concern and showed a sharply different perspective on the relative importance of risk and urgency.

COMMENT: Still Fishing for Assurances

¶6. (SBU) Judging from this series of conversations, the Embassy of Japan was still fishing for assurances that the Kandahar region will soon be "safe for commercial operations" at the same time that it was expressing its intention to build the road soon. We hope that the security briefing has disabused the Japanese Embassy of the notion that it can be assured of any normal level of safety. This would seem to be the first step to thinking about how to get it done in an unsafe environment. As reported previously (reftel A), this matter may need continued encouragement at all levels.

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